

Holy Week Meditations

PALM SUNDAY

Matthew 21:1-17

When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, 'The Lord needs them.' And he will send them immediately." This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,

"Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you,

humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey."

The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, "Who is this?" The crowds were saying, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee."

Then Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves. He said to them, "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer'; but you are making it a den of robbers."

The blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he cured them. But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the amazing things that he did, and heard the children crying out in the temple, "Hosanna to the Son of David," they became angry and said to him, "Do you hear what these are saying?" Jesus said to them, "Yes; have you never read, 'Out of the mouths of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise for yourself'?"

He left them, went out of the city to Bethany, and spent the night there.

Through this Holy Week I want us to think about some of the characters that we meet as the Gospels lead us through this week. Today, I want us to think about the man, Jesus in whom the finite and infinite in God meet together.

Jesus enters Jerusalem and it is a deliberate claim to be the Messiah. It is the same route and transport as King David had used when he reentered Jerusalem after one or two family problems that he had to work through!. The Donkey, rather than a war horse, is a sign of humility and the palm branches a sign of peace.

Alongside all of this there is the sense that this is the country introducing their Messiah to the city! It wasn't the first time that Jesus had been to Jerusalem and neither was it the first time that Jesus had been in bother in the city. It is almost as if the religious leaders were miffed that God hadn't consulted with them on what he planned to do and taken advice on the sort of messiah that was needed.

Jesus arrives at the Temple and makes a bit of a scene and disrupts legitimate the legitimate and necessary trade that had to go on there. Roman coin has to be changed for Temple coin as Caesar's head was an image that was not allowed. Sacrificial animals had to be bought as they had to be perfect - if you had walked a lamb 25 miles it probably wouldn't have been.

The measure of the man Jesus is that this event was never mentioned at his trial. The Antonian Fort, perched as it was on the corner of the Temple grounds, would have seen and responded to any trouble. But there was none. Such was Jesus' personal impact and authority that no-one fights back and no-one reports him.

We begin this week noticing Jesus authority. That authority isn't diminished when he sends Judas to betray him; nor when he is on trial for blasphemy before the religious authorities; nor when he is on trial before Pontius Pilate for treason. It isn't diminished when he is crucified and is still there when he dies and is buried.

**Praise to the Holiest in the height, and in the depth be praise;
in all his words most wonderful, most sure in all his ways!**

**O loving wisdom of our God! When all was sin and shame,
a second Adam to the fight and to the rescue came.**

Collect for Palm Sunday

Almighty and everlasting God, who in your tender love towards the human race sent your Son our Saviour Jesus Christ to take upon him our flesh and to suffer death upon the cross:

grant that we may follow the example of his patience and humility, and also be made partakers of his resurrection;

through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen

MONDAY IN HOLY WEEK

John 12.1-11

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ²There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him.³Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. ⁴But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, ⁵'Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?'⁶(He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) ⁷Jesus said, 'Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. ⁸You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.'

⁹ When the great crowd of the Jews learned that he was there, they came not only because of Jesus but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ¹⁰So the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death as well,¹¹since it was on account of him that many of the Jews were deserting and were believing in Jesus.

Yesterday we focused on Jesus and the personal authority he demonstrated in the cleansing of the temple. Today we go back a day to the dinner before the Palm Sunday procession that was held for Jesus in Bethany, less than two miles away.

Today we focus our thoughts around Mary, the sister of Lazarus and Martha and I have been thinking that this Holy Week is for Jesus more like a wake before his funeral. Today is the anointing and Thursday is the party!

This Nard, a perfume from India, that Mary poured over Jesus' feet was of enormous value - a years wages for a working man. John records that detail that must have been so striking, that the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. Two questions have occupied my thinking about Mary:

Did she know what she was doing? Her behaviour was outrageous. Moving from her couch where she would have been reclining at the table according to the custom of the time, she moves to where Jesus is and pours such a large quantity of oil on Jesus' feet. Her next act, of undoing her hair, which would have been kept covered, and wiping Jesus feet with it was such an intimate act: I can hear my Grannie tutting at such a thing - she was a believer in social distancing decades before it has become popular! Yet, this outrageous act was true worship - it was the offering of the best that she had to Jesus and a totally offering of herself in his service. Mary's generosity and extravagantly demonstrative love will always be a challenge to what we offer and give.

Did she know why she was doing it? Was Mary aware that this was the wake before the death? Jesus does hint that she might. This Nard was bought for the day Mary would anoint his body for burial. Had Jesus brought her into his confidence and that she had believed that he would die whilst the disciples refused to accept it?

Against the plots of the religious leaders to kill him and the refusal of the disciples to accept what Jesus had predicted so often, Mary's tangible ministry to Jesus must have been so comforting to him. We, now, have to be creative in how we express our worship and how we can be a comfort to others.

Prayer for today:

Keep us, good Lord, under the shadow of your mercy in this time of uncertainty and distress. Sustain and support the anxious and fearful, and lift up all who are brought low; that we may rejoice in your comfort knowing that nothing can separate us from your love in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

TUESDAY IN HOLY WEEK

John 12.20-36

Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. ²¹They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, 'Sir, we wish to see Jesus.' ²²Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. ²³Jesus answered them, 'The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. ²⁴Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. ²⁵Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ²⁶Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honour.

²⁷ 'Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say - "Father, save me from this hour"? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. ²⁸Father, glorify your name.' Then a voice came from heaven, 'I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.' ²⁹The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, 'An angel has spoken to him.' ³⁰Jesus answered, 'This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. ³¹Now is the judgement of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. ³²And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.' ³³He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die. ³⁴The crowd answered him, 'We have heard from the law that the Messiah remains for ever. How can you say that the Son of Man must be lifted up? Who is this Son of Man?' ³⁵Jesus said to them, 'The light is with you for a little longer. Walk while you have the light, so that the darkness may not overtake you. If you walk in the darkness, you do not know where you are going. ³⁶While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become children of light.'

After Jesus had said this, he departed and hid from them.

Philip is our focus for today. Some Greeks were in Jerusalem and wanted to have an interview with Jesus so they approached Philip - it may be for the simple reason that he had a Greek name. As the text of John's Gospel unfolds it is fascinating to note that the Greeks desire to see Jesus stands in such stark contrast with the hatred of the Pharisees. Was Jesus seeing Gentiles? Philip obviously wasn't clear, there is in his mind some doubt, some uncertainty: so he goes to ask Andrew - he doesn't know either! They approach Jesus and he obviously has other things on his mind and doesn't respond directly to the enquiry - it seems, in this Holy Week, that he has more pressing matters absorbing his thought!

Yet the things that seem to distract Jesus do answer the question at the heart of this: who may approach Jesus? Can Gentiles? It takes a while to get there: we have the agricultural imagery of a seed having to die to germinate; there is the bipolar approach that sees things from God's perspective so that we let go of our power over our own lives so that we can live them more fully; there is the call to follow Jesus, even if we don't know where that will lead. The answer to the question is that through the cross Jesus will draw all people to himself.

The interruption from the Greeks seems to have clarified Jesus purpose - this is **The** Hour. God's glory won't be discovered beyond the cross, it will be discovered on the cross. The promise of the triumphant messiah from Palm Sunday that so many wanted fades as the shadow of the cross looms large for Jesus. If the cross doesn't embrace us the resurrection can't lift us.

Uncertainty and confusion are never easy to live with and, even when we go (following Philips example) to the source of our faith, to Jesus, it can be frustrating when we don't get direct answers to the things that are of concern to us. We, with Jesus, need to discover God in the uncertainty and suffering; to find the glory in picking up our cross and following, of lingering in the disturbing before being liberated into hope-ridden freedom. It is to find contentment in the isolation of suffering and not making that conditional on a happy ending of our choice.

Philip teaches us that uncertainty is OK; we can live with it and still be people of faith.

Prayer for today:

We are not people of fear: we are people of courage.

We are not people who protect our own safety:

we are people who protect our neighbours' safety.

We are not people of greed: we are people of generosity.

We are your people God, giving and loving, wherever we are, whatever it costs

For as long as it takes wherever you call us. Amen.

WEDNESDAY IN HOLY WEEK

John 13.21-32

After saying this Jesus was troubled in spirit, and declared, ‘Very truly, I tell you, one of you will betray me.’²²The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he was speaking. ²³One of his disciples - the one whom Jesus loved - was reclining next to him; ²⁴Simon Peter therefore motioned to him to ask Jesus of whom he was speaking. ²⁵So while reclining next to Jesus, he asked him, ‘Lord, who is it?’ ²⁶Jesus answered, ‘It is the one to whom I give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish.’ So when he had dipped the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas son of Simon Iscariot. ²⁷After he received the piece of bread, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, ‘Do quickly what you are going to do.’ ²⁸Now no one at the table knew why he said this to him. ²⁹Some thought that, because Judas had the common purse, Jesus was telling him, ‘Buy what we need for the festival’; or, that he should give something to the poor. ³⁰So, after receiving the piece of bread, he immediately went out. And it was night.

³¹ When he had gone out, Jesus said, ‘Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him.’³²If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once.

Peter Buchan was my inspirational music teacher in school: I owe my love of music, the organ and JS Bach to him. It was he who offered a rough translation of the Latin school motto. He suggested that *Sapientia Clavis Vitae* meant, ‘It wisnae me, it wiz him!’

Our character for today is Judas. If we are honest we like Judas because he gives us someone to blame: ‘it wiz him!’. How easily we justify that. comparatively, he is worse than we are and then make the unjustified jump to the belief that we are therefore better than Judas. It is worth reminding ourselves that Judas was called by Jesus to be a disciple and, although we know he wasn’t entirely trustworthy as the treasurer of the group, he was still there three years on. In the geography of the last supper, where all are reclined at table, Judas must have had a place of honour as he was close enough to Jesus to be handed a piece of bread (the import of which only John knew, but does not betray). How easily the nuances of what was going on would have been missed by the Disciples: here were people from the country enjoying a festival in the city; here they were having a party and anticipating what the Messiah would do next after the Palm Sunday events; here they were recovering from having their feet washed by Jesus. You can imagine how easily a whispered question and a shared piece of food would be missed; how easily someone slipping out would be noticed and then forgotten.

Yet, Good Friday depends on Judas. Jesus ends the passage we read today by stating that God’s glory is worked out in precisely this. Satan may have entered Judas to empower the betrayal (and we know that it was something he found impossible to live with afterwards) but it was still a real and necessary part of God’s plan. If anyone is to held responsible for the passion and death of Jesus, God is. The humanity of Jesus becomes clear when he tells Judas, as much for his own sake as for Judas, to get on with what he had to do. We are all responsible for the death of Jesus, but, because this is God’s saving grace, it is about responsibility not blame.

**I cannot tell how he would love a child so weak and full of sin;
his love must be most wonderful, if he could die my love to win.**

**But even could I see him die, I could but see a little part
of that great love, which, like a fire, is always burning in his heart.**

**It is most wonderful to know his love for me so free and sure;
but 'tis more wonderful to see my love for him so faint and poor.**

Prayer for today:

Almighty and everlasting God, who in your tender love towards the human race sent your Son our Saviour Jesus Christ to take upon him our flesh and to suffer death upon the cross: grant that we may follow the example of his patience and humility, and also be made partakers of his resurrection; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

MAUNDY THURSDAY

John 13.1-17, 31b-35

Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. ²The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper ³Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, ⁴got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. ⁵Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. ⁶He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, 'Lord, are you going to wash my feet?' ⁷Jesus answered, 'You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand.' ⁸Peter said to him, 'You will never wash my feet.' Jesus answered, 'Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.' ⁹Simon Peter said to him, 'Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!' ¹⁰Jesus said to him, 'One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you.' ¹¹For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, 'Not all of you are clean.'

¹² After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, 'Do you know what I have done to you?' ¹³You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. ¹⁴So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. ¹⁵For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. ¹⁶Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. ¹⁷If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.

³¹ When he had gone out, Jesus said, 'Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. ³²If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. ³³Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, "Where I am going, you cannot come." ³⁴I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. ³⁵By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.'

It would normally have been the case that I would now be preparing for the service this evening at which I would have the privilege of washing the feet of 12 people and then proceed to the celebration of the Lord's Supper before we take the consecrated bread to an Altar of Repose whilst the rest of the Church is stripped and cleared away before a vigil. This very moving service wasn't something that I had experienced where I grew up in the north east of Scotland, nor in my years as a Baptist Minister. We would also spend some time thinking about the *Mandatum Novum*, the New Commandment from which Maundy Thursday derives its name. It is always moving.

Our character from the unfolding story of Holy Week has, today, to be Peter. We know that immediately after our reading ends Jesus goes on to predict that Peter will deny him three times, something that he cannot imagine, but it happens. It is the sign of the impetuous disciple in whom so many of us see ourselves. He really didn't understand what was going on at the Last Supper. I am certain that he didn't doubt that he was loved by Jesus, but he had a lot to learn about what that love meant. The text plays out an interesting background to the washing of the disciples feet. The Devil is noted as the power behind Jesus' betrayal and then it goes on to note that God had put all things into Jesus' hands (literally, into his power). Jesus chooses to exercise that power in an act of service rather than a direct challenge to the devil at that time.

Peter knows that no-one was expected to wash someone else's feet. Culture demanded that water and towel be provided, but you dealt with your own feet! The other disciples were probably shocked, but they express their embarrassment in their silence. It is Peter who questions Jesus, refuses to accept what is going on and, then, in characteristic overstatement requests a bath! It wouldn't have changed things - he would still follow Jesus where others would not and then deny him before he knew what he was doing.

The New Commandment, to love one another, expressed in washing the feet of others is still a living symbol of that love. A love that indulges in Peter, and in us all, the impetuosity and tendency to fail and still goes to the cross to forgive the sins, all the sins of the past the present and the future.

**Finish then Thy new creation; pure and spotless let us be.
Let us see Thy great salvation perfectly restored in Thee.**

Prayer for today:

Lord Jesus Christ, you taught us to love our neighbour,
and to care for those in need as if we were caring for you.
In this time of anxiety, give us strength to comfort the fearful, to tend the sick,
and to assure the isolated of our love, and your love, for your name's sake. Amen.

GOOD FRIDAY

John 19:38-42

After these things, Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one because of his fear of the Jews, asked Pilate to let him take away the body of Jesus. Pilate gave him permission; so he came and removed his body. ³⁹Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. ⁴⁰They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews. ⁴¹Now there was a garden in the place where he was crucified, and in the garden there was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid. ⁴²And so, because it was the Jewish day of Preparation, and the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.

The events of Good Friday have unfolded. The Jewish Authorities will have met through the night and arrived before Pilate, the Roman Governor, as early as they could. There wasn't space for a great crowd and, at any rate, the Jews would not have defiled themselves by going into such unholy ground, however unholy their purpose. Jesus has, by this point in the day, been tried, scourged, mocked, been forced to carry his cross, has been stripped and crucified and, having given up his spirit to his Father in that great risk when God the Son has to allow God the Father to let go of him so that that loving embrace can surround all of humanity as, one by one, the potential of the cross is realised by those who come to claim its action for their forgiveness.

It is after all of this that our character for today comes to the fore. Joseph of Arimathea. He appears in all four Gospels as the person who takes responsibility for the burial of Jesus. All we know about Joseph of Arimathea is that he was Jewish; that he was rich; that he was a member of the Jewish ruling body, the Sanhedrin; that he was looking for the Kingdom of God; and that he was a secret disciple of Jesus. But the death of Jesus forces him to break his cover. It takes someone of his standing - the right person in the right place at the right time - to approach Pontius Pilate to ask for Jesus' body. It was the practice that victims of crucifixion were given to their next of kin, or buried in a common pit, unless they were, as Jesus had been, tried for sedition: in that case the body was left to the vultures as a final humiliation. The fact that Pilate agrees to release the body for a dignified burial is perhaps further evidence that he was not convinced that Jesus was guilty.

In the end two secret disciples break their cover, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, and engage in the messy and bloody business of getting a body off a cross, wrapped in spices with cloths and into a convenient tomb, used by Jesus as its first occupant and where he lies alone. Despite many different myths and traditions, Joseph disappears after this kindness in honouring the corpse at what have been a low point in hope and expectation. Yet, this seemingly final courtesy, was Joseph of Arimathea taking up his cross and following Jesus.

What Joseph does show to us is that the cross, where God has shown the fullest extent of his love, requires a response. It is the same response as his, that we break cover, reveal our faith and accept this simple truth:

**There was no other good enough to pay the price of sin;
he only could unlock the gate of heav'n, and let us in.**

Prayer for today:

Almighty Father, look with mercy on this your family for which our Lord Jesus Christ was content to be betrayed and given up into the hands of sinners and to suffer death upon the cross; who is alive and glorified with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.